

EMPIRE SYMBOL, OR A MAN AND HIS MULE

BAMBITCHELL

Friday, September 11, 2015 to Saturday, October 17, 2015

Empire Symbol, Or A Man and his Mule, traces the journey of a Canadian veterinarian who was responsible for transporting mules from New York to Karachi, India during WWII. Employing his diary entries, Bambitchell unearth both the psychic life of The Vet, as well as the histories of Canadian Militarism that are embedded within mundane processes of global trade and transport.

“As the title of this work would suggest, there is more to the man and his mule than a man and his mule, literally speaking. But it takes a reading and a looking capable of seeing what lies under the surface. Indeed, if we scratch the surface of the diary, as Bambitchell have, violence is being mapped in the everydayness of war and in the quotidian realities of life under imperialism. The mule, taken for granted and discarded by power as a figure that might actually reveal its workings, exposes empire in an aesthetic practice that is interested in unearthing and tracing covert knowledge.”
Dr. Dina Georgis, Professor in Women and Gender Studies at The University of Toronto

Leila Timmins: The storyline of *Empire, Symbol, Or A Man and his Mule* is derived from archival material that you found during a research residency at Wilfrid Laurier University? Can you talk about how you came to this text?

Sharlene Bamboat: This project was first realized as a project called “Art and Memory at the Borders”, which was a joint commission from the Canadian Network for Psychoanalysis and Culture and the Centre for Memory and Testimony Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, in collaboration with Sara Matthews and Dina Georgis. It was during our initial research at the university, when we discovered their military history archive. During our time spent at the archives, we became fascinated with the donated letters, diaries and ephemera from Canadian soldiers in WWII.

Alexis Mitchell: Sara and Dina had prompted us to question the idea of borders, both as a geographic and military construct but also as a psychic construct – the borders between conscious and unconscious. Because of this, we decided to look specifically at diaries or the ephemera that soldiers themselves had given to the archives, pieces of personal significance. The question we had in our minds while we were working in the archives was: How do people narrate their own stories, and more specifically how do people talk about their own trauma? We weren’t looking for specific narratives, but we thought that the personal objects donated to the archives might give us a way of tackling this question of psychic borders while also looking at these military borders.

SB: We were drawn to a collection that had belonged to a soldier from Southern Ontario who was a veterinarian and his job during the war was to move mules from North America (mostly New York) to Karachi, India, which was also the city that I was born in. I am interested in the pre-partition era (before the formation of Pakistan) and so this served as an interesting anchor point for me personally. But what was also interesting was this soldier had written meticulously in his diary every day, sometimes multiple times a day and he would record the exact location of where he was at sea (inclusive of longitude/latitude, etc.) – these locations show up in our video. Most interestingly though, and in contrast to all the other diaries we read, he wrote about all the mundane, everyday things that would happen on the ship and he very rarely wrote about the war. While the other soldiers were talking about

the trenches and the gory things they would see, this guy was having gin cocktails and playing deck tennis on the boat and so we kind of had to do the job of imagining where he was in time and space and what else was happening in the world.

LT: You use interesting and overlapping narrative strategies in the work. How are you approaching narrative in the work and how are you thinking through activating archives and pulling a historic text into the present?

AM: One of the things that always draws us to the things we work on, is getting at a deep and rich history, but not in any direct way. We are always trying to look around an issue to see what kind of pieces we can draw together rather than going directly for the “trauma” or the kernel of the narrative. So in thinking this way, we were really drawn to this flowery text and were interested in the absences – what he is not saying. So our narrative strategies came from this place, in order to try to point towards what is missing from these documents and these historical records of wartime. The text documents four months in the middle of WWII when he travels across the world but he says very little about the violence happening around him. And so, with this question in mind of how do you get at someone else’s memories? How do you probe their brain space when they are not saying explicitly what they are experiencing? We tried to offer up a number of possible ways into the world this man existed in at this brief moment in time. We are constantly thinking about the best way of representing a history or someone else’s story without being authoritative, so we tried to open up multiple possibilities at the same time.

LT: The mule plays a central role in this narrative. Can you talk about the mule as a symbol in this work?

AM: We became obsessed with mules, because although the Vet’s job is to move mules for the military, he doesn’t provide anymore context than that. The only information about the mules that was provided was a note from the person who dropped the box off to the archive, which said: “When the mules got to Karachi, their vocal cords were slit so they would make no noise.” But there was no reference to this in the diary. So we wanted to find out what these mules were used for. Why was a Canadian soldier bringing mules from the US to Karachi? And so we started researching the

use of mules in the military. We learned mules can be trained in particular ways because they are sure footed and quite well behaved so they were used to carry military equipment through tough terrain, and their vocal cords would have been slit because they were used to cross enemy lines moving both artillery and human bodies.

LT: It is an interesting slip between life and technology. In a way it is turning life into a technology.

AM: Yes, exactly, which is what brought us to thinking about Deborah Cowen’s work. I knew that there must be a lot of poignant connections since her work talks about the ways that contemporary global trade is based on these very specific military models of moving goods. So this is what the mules are, they are a carrier for goods, just as much as they are goods themselves, they have a use value in this context, which eventually creates a market, contributing to this larger schema – which is capitalism and global trade. We wanted to draw this one soldier’s story out to a broader geopolitical scale, so we don’t just view this as one person moving goods, the Vet’s story carries through to today as our trade routes are based on these historic routes that he travelled and that were developed for military use.

LT: Your work often incorporates camp aesthetics and there seem to be some campy elements in the work with how you reenact the diary entries. Can you talk about camp as a strategy in your work?

AM: Camp as a strategy in our work follows the same line of thinking, where we take this thing that seems minute and perhaps mundane and explode it out. Camp has this ability to turn something on its head, and so we often feel that the only way to get at what is psychically subconscious or the only way to unearth what is not being spoken about – these larger processes, and deeply embedded histories, is to make what is there and available to us seem so ridiculous that people have to pause and think this must be about something else.

SB: It also lets us play with the really dense and complicated material that we generally choose to work with. Lightness allows us to talk about trauma in new ways and opens up other possibilities and different ways of doing things, different ways of seeing. Which, I think, is the purpose of making artwork.

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Bambitchell is an artistic collaboration based in Toronto, between Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell. Their practice uses queer and feminist frameworks to re-imagine borders, mobility, labour, migration and memory. By employing a wide range of media, the duo examine the complexity of attachments produced in relation to the nation-state. Their work has been exhibited in galleries and at festivals internationally, including shows at the Art Gallery of Windsor (2015), The Images Festival (2014), and Nuit Blanche Toronto (2011). They have given numerous public talks and their work appears in a wide range of artistic and academic publications, including a forthcoming book titled, ‘Mobile Desires: The Erotics and Politics of Mobility Justice’. Bambitchell have been awarded multiple commissions and have upcoming residencies at the Sante Fe Art Institute, and Akademie Schloss Solitude in Germany. The duo received the Homebrew Award from the Images Festival for their project ‘Silent Citizen’ (2014) and have an upcoming exhibition at Article (Montreal).

Photograph in centre vitrine by Callan Field.